

Independent schools as resource centres

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THE Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (RTE Act) is seen by many as a first bold step towards bringing equity to the existing educational scenario in India. Speaking to the nation on the occasion of the passage through Parliament of the Model Rules for the implementation of the act, our cerebral Prime Minister Manmohan Singh recalled his own past with emotion: 'I was born to a family of modest means. In my childhood I had to walk a long distance to go to school. I read under the dim light of a kerosene lamp. I am what I am today because of education.' Given this past, the least a leader of his convictions has to offer the nation is equality of educational opportunity.

In bringing education within reach of the rural population as a matter of right, the act defines the state's obligations to its citizens. In calling for the reservation of 25% seats in independent schools for the impoverished children of the neighbourhood, the act reminds the well-to-do of their duty to their fellow countrymen and women. Both provisions continue the never-ending task of defining the complex nation with its long, pluralistic past. The introduction to the bill asserts its own democratic intent: 'The crucial role of universal elementary education for strengthening the social fabric of democracy through provision of equal opportunities to all has been accepted since inception of our Republic.'

The prime minister has correctly read the rising aspirations of India's poorest parents across India; they are now persuaded that attending school is important for their children. According to recent statistics, more than 93% children between the ages of six and 14 are enrolled in school. The faith that education is the means of lifting individuals from poverty is spread across the country, shared by policymakers and those subject to the policy. The quality of education their children receive in government schools, however, may not justify either the sacrifices impoverished families make when they send their children to school or the celebrations the enrolment figures evoke. If the ASER figures are correct, less than half of government school students in class five are able to handle division in arithmetic or read at class two levels in their mother tongue. The quality of education in large numbers

of government schools remains abysmally low.

By contrast, the prime minister's faith in education is mirrored in the educational aspirations of the elite classes of the country, who are increasingly turning to foreign models of education, to schools that run IGCSE and IB programmes, so that the education their children receive will vault them into good universities abroad. Language and culture separate the wealthy from the impoverished, and the gap between the wealthier classes and the rest has become wider than it was in the past.

The RTE Act seeks to address this divide by co-opting independent schools catering to privileged sections of society or to religious minorities into reserving 25% seats for poor children of the neighbourhood who cannot afford good education. The clear intention of this provision, to strengthen the fabric of democracy through the school system, echoes the historical experience of mass education in a democratic country, such as America. 'Public schools,' claims the historian Arthur Schlesinger, 'have been the great instrument of assimilation and the great means of forming an American identity. What students are taught in school will thereafter affect the way they treat other Americans, and the way they will thereafter conceive the purposes of the republic.'¹

So also in an India divided by religion and caste and, above all by class, schooling can take on a transformative role. With the 25% infusion of underprivileged children into elite schools, rich kids will have as friends classmates who are not privileged, who don't speak good English, who may not be able to invite them to birthday parties in their homes. The view from the gated community will then change – perhaps the privileged will learn to speak an Indian language more fluently, perhaps they will learn to take responsibilities for their countrymen and women, to limit their own consumption patterns, for instance. The act has the potential, if implemented in the proper spirit, to promote our collective identity as a nation.

Much of the current public discussions of universalizing elementary education focus on three issues related to the problem of teaching: (i) How to provide for a larger number of schools in regions where access to schooling remains problematic. (ii) How to educate and have available a very large number of additional teachers. (iii) How to make various agencies and actors – government departments, various kinds of government and independent schools, as well as teachers and parents – responsible for the implementation for meeting the provisions of the act.

Whereas the first two are clearly areas where central and state governments will need to take the lead

role (both in setting up new schools and seeing to it that all governments schools have the adequate numbers of teachers), the third is an area of joint responsibility for various sections of society. In this paper, we focus largely on the third issue of how independent schools can extend the reach of sound educational practices developed in their institutions. Intrinsic to the question of implementation is the possibility, hitherto unexplored, of independent schools with years of successful experience behind them contributing to improving the quality of teaching and learning in government schools.

We feel that good, independent schools, including non-formal schools run by NGOs, if given a more substantial role in public education, can significantly contribute to raising standards in government run schools. They are in a position to 'adopt' government schools of the neighbourhood; working jointly with government appointed headmasters they could provide academic support to teachers in the form of access to innovative teaching practices and coherent work materials. With courtesy and tact, good independent schools could become partners and agents of change in large numbers of government schools across the country.

Having stated this, let us emphasize that our chief concern in this paper is to address in some detail deeper issues of quality in education. However, before we go into specifics, some pitfalls of the RTE Act in its present form need to be looked at.

We are constrained to note at the outset that the RTE Act has not been generous to some of the more creative institutions that have been, and could continue to be, responsible for introducing educational innovations and social change. It contains several punitive clauses (sections 13 and 18) in terms of fines and threats of shutdown for schools that do not meet the stringent regulating features set down by the act, that penalize those groups which give lower salaries to teachers without specialized degrees because they can't afford the standardized salaries. Several pertinent questions spring from RTE documents' approach to non-standard schooling.

Why is it that some of the smallest and most innovative schools today are run by NGOs who lack educational degrees and can't pay prescribed salaries but have passionate teachers? Why don't these teachers opt for the more lucrative government institutions? When implementing only the formal aspects of the act will require almost a million additional teachers and countless remediation programmes, why waste existing resources by shutting down schools, and making experienced teachers in the field take courses in education when almost all courses on offer are substandard? Are degrees from the existing teacher education institutes better than apprenticeship in a coherently run school setting? And finally, why is the government promoting rules that place state bureaucrats, who in all probability lack educational experience and expertise, to regulate every school in the country? Also,

what does 'standard five' mean?

Rules forbidding testing constitute a risky provision in the RTE Act. The elementary school is denied the right to hold back a student in a class even if he is not equipped to join a higher grade (section 16); teachers may not be allowed to evaluate students they teach, except in terms of norms laid down by an 'academic authority specified by the appropriate government, by notification' (section 29). This prohibition refers probably to standardized achievement tests patterned after those used in the United States and administered centrally, that provide evaluations of both individual students and, when student achievements are aggregated, to the emerging profile of a school.

Standardized tests are no substitute for the diagnostic tests teachers may choose to administer in order to identify and then rectify problems an individual student has, say with division in arithmetic. The constraints on all testing combined with the policy on promotion – each child has, by law, to be placed in an age appropriate class – renders rote learning systemic. What else can a teacher tied down to an age appropriate textbook² do if a large number of her class five students are new readers?

If the ASER figures are correct, that less than 50% of students in class five read at class two levels, then the majority of students currently enrolled in government schools will require remedial attention.³ The option, then, of organizing remediation classes falls to the lot of parents who can ill-afford the extra expense. Section 4 of the RTE Act and the Model Rules for implementing the act provide for underperforming students; they authorize the 'special authority', i.e., the government education bureaucracy, to approve 'age appropriate learning material.' This blanket rule has no reference to particular difficulties of individual children. As is probable, calculations regarding the additional number of teachers needed to service this larger body of underperforming students have not been factored into cost estimates.

The figures here can be staggering, a typical group of students assigned to class five in the Andhra Pradesh countryside – and Andhra Pradesh is not exceptional in this respect – will require at least five levels of remediation in reading alone. RTE policy lays down that class levels reflect the age of students not their academic proficiency. The meaning of the cognate words 'class', 'standard', 'grade' are thereby robbed of their primary meaning, which stands for a level of proficiency in selected subjects across the group. Class five, or any single class for that matter, insofar as it has students with multiple levels of academic achievements, virtually turns into a one-room school.

Student performance will undoubtedly improve with anywhere between two or five teachers assigned to a class of forty students, if there is sufficient political will to provide funding for these provisions. But whether students will ever reach the learning levels appropriate to their age, and continue to keep up with the level set by ‘age-appropriate’ textbooks is quite another matter. Our own experience with bridge courses organized in specially held camps shows that students are enthusiastic about learning and most do catch up to the required level, but once they are in school lose interest and even drop out once again.

From the perspective of teachers located in the semi-arid countryside of Andhra Pradesh, the many provisions of the RTE Act, including those that make local bodies responsible for schools would at best succeed in multiplying schools of the same kind: elementary school children forced to sit for hours listening to uninspiring lessons (about mineral deposits in Australia; the scope of a subject called ‘economics’) from bored and unmotivated teachers; parents belonging in an oral culture listening to students reciting their lessons as they ‘progress’ from class to class.

This may work in the short run, but even as this is being written there are signs of changing attitudes, that greater numbers of parents in the countryside are sending their children to private schools, fearing probably that the education given in government schools will not serve the larger purpose of lifting their families out of poverty. The prospects of their wards remaining unemployable, caught between a world that promotes livelihoods and one that offers job prospects, is real and calls for serious reflection.

A provision of the act that empowers local authorities and parents to monitor government schools (section 21 (1) (2)) may at best ensure that teachers and students actually attend school and are doing something in classrooms, but does not address the core problem – lack of motivation on the part of teachers and of children exposed to the alienating culture of current schooling.

The threats built into several clauses of the RTE rest on the assumptions that teacher competency is identical with B.Ed and M.Ed degrees, that government sanctioned tests are the best and only index of students’ academic standing, that the central government remains the sole custodian of academic and evaluative frameworks for schools (section 7 (6)) and that, in tandem with local bodies, governance will ensure quality (section 21). These assumptions remain untested and could well be false.

To sum up, fulfilling the formal requirements of the RTE Act will not address the lack of meaningful education that is the lot of the impoverished sections of our society. If the act becomes a coercive instrument, it will at most swell the ranks of children enrolled in the government system while creating

hurdles for some who really care about the crucial issues of meaningful learning. There is a wide gap between the high ideals embodied in the RTE Act and the instruments for achieving democratic goals outlined in the act itself and spelt out in the model rules.

The RTE Act and discussions surrounding it emphasize the need for a child-friendly educational environment; however, there is hardly any mention of enabling teacher-friendly and teacher-initiated approaches to bring about real change. We think the two are intertwined, that child-centred teaching and spaces for innovative teaching go hand in hand; one is not possible without the other. The current system of academic administration remains emphatically vertical, organizationally top-down, focused on textbooks, leaving minimal scope either for teacher participation or teacher initiative. And the mechanism of monitoring schools relies heavily on inspection, assessments and punishment, with very little support for guiding and nurturing teachers.

The RTE Act promotes the present centralized system to curtail teachers' capacity to work independently. While it is correct to emphasize access, it is equally important to take a fresh approach that meets children's and teacher's educational needs in the wider context of meaningful learning. Otherwise the present state of affairs, with a very larger numbers of children attending school without the commensurate increase in either literacy or any other form of educational attainment, will continue.

A child-friendly education system, at primary and upper primary levels, requires a curriculum that awakens the children's senses, their levels of awareness and curiosity, and lays the foundations for understanding the immediate cultural and natural world she inhabits. It implies that a significant part of the study material is constituted by local content: knowledge of surrounding landscapes, of the flow of water in the locality, of soil composition; of the local flora and fauna and their role in maintaining the basis of livelihoods; of local folklore; of acquaintance with historical monuments and why they were built; of the importance of village commons, sacred groves and the purposes they serve. Students, parents and teachers can then relate to this content not only with the aid of the text but also directly, through observation. Academic principles, those that are integral to the subject discipline, would then become intertwined with local content to create a truly child-friendly atmosphere in classrooms.

Teachers, who speak local languages, who are acquainted with local customs and familiar with the

curricular content would be well equipped to build up local content. Such practices would make teachers participants in filling out the curriculum and creating a certain quantum of teaching-learning materials. This grassroots approach would at the same time give teachers a stake in enhancing children's learning of the material she has had a hand in developing. In contrast, the present state of affairs where a single state-wide curriculum without any local content, typically designed by a small group of 'experts' in urban centres, can hardly embrace the educational needs of children belonging to different regions of the state, to both urban and rural areas. Ideally, if the elementary level of schooling promotes the use of the senses to understand the local and the regional, this understanding will become the basic ground upon which abstract knowledge necessary in the higher classes can rest.

Second, it is necessary to take into consideration significant differences that exist in the background knowledge and learning abilities of different children. The one-size-fits-all approach combined with textbook chapters that are unrelated to their lives and the life skills they need to gain, is responsible for some students not reaching required age-appropriate competences but remaining behind.

Finally, unless there is an ongoing assessment of each child combined with appropriately targeted remedial measures *initiated by individual teachers*, one cannot address the learning needs of different children. Without adequate modes of assessment in place (or even some form of periodic testing), automatically promoting a child to higher classes, as suggested by the RTE Act, becomes meaningless. It leads to several children moving from 'class' to 'class' without having learnt anything significant in school.

In fact, gathering together the above points, one can question the relevance of the notion of 'class' or 'grade' itself. In a schooling situation where diversity in children's backgrounds, abilities and pace of learning is the reality, it makes eminent sense to treat the curriculum for the entire period of elementary education as a coherently designed learning continuum interspersed with well-defined achievement milestones. This multi-year curriculum stands in sharp contrast to the present system that breaks down the curriculum into watertight subject-wise, 'class-based syllabi' that students belonging to each class group need to somehow complete by the end of the academic year, that, in addition, requires teachers and students, whether quick or slow, to be on the same pages of textbooks.

The approach we recommend requires visualizing and structuring the whole curriculum into smaller units of learning while ensuring that the units fit together consistently. Each child would then need to be helped to learn to navigate various steps along the continuum, at a pace commensurate with her abilities. Carefully structured and yet flexible teaching-learning materials (including perhaps better written textbooks that allow space for local content), into which are integrated individual as well as

group learning activities, would provide support to teachers, who are expected to work with children at different points in this learning continuum. Clearly defined milestones would facilitate assessment followed by remediation and enrichment, as the case may be, for each child, on an ongoing basis. The assumption here is that the arrangement of the learning process satisfies the requirements of learning a subject while accommodating the pace at which individual children learn. Since remediation is built into its design, the learning continuum does away with the need for special tuitions outside the classroom.

Such a possibility of reorganization of elementary level schooling was the declared intention of the Government of India document published to mark the fiftieth anniversary of Indian independence. Called a ‘Compilation on 50 years of Indian Education: 1947-1997’, the document explicitly declares:

‘Learning has been seen as a "continuum", in which the units are sequenced hierarchically so that the clusters of competencies in one unit build as directly as possible on the competencies in the preceding unit. It is firmly believed that if the children progress systematically through this continuum, mastering the concerned sets or competencies in each unit before they move on to the next, learning each subsequent unit will be more enjoyable and meaningful, and the achievement of minimum levels of learning will be facilitated.’⁴ A similar programme for elementary level schooling, it seems to us, could in fact be read into several of the provisions of the RTE Act relating to children and pedagogy.’ [See chapter IV 16, chapter V 29(2) e and h, and 30(1)]

To begin responding to the question of the possible role of independent schools in assisting educational problems faced by the country, it should be mentioned that some private schools and NGOs (Krishnamurti Foundation of India Schools being among them) have long been working on the development of viable and successful models of elementary education that build on the idea of a learning continuum, with structured teaching-learning materials, and built-in assessment strategies. We believe that the experience of such organizations need to be pooled together, along with effective ways of scaling up this approach to government schools. This is clearly one role that independent schools could play in the context of implementing the RTE Act.

A second area relates to the task of finding a large number of trained teachers in the next five years as well as retraining and motivating existing teachers, as envisaged in the RTE Act. This is a complex task, and many directions of solutions will have to be found to educate effective teachers. However, some of the solutions being considered, namely (a) asking universities to start teacher-training

programmes and conducting refresher programmes for existing teachers, and (b) conducting in-service as well as pre-service teacher education programmes through distance learning, are very limited, in view of the fact that most of these measures do not provide space for hands-on experience.

Since some of our well-known teacher education institutions do not have attached schools where theories are validated, the courses they offer, even if augmented by distance learning technologies, would perhaps be able to create a large body of ‘trained’ teachers at top speed; however, we doubt whether this massive effort and expenditure will prove effective. Effective teacher education, we feel, necessarily requires systematic understanding of children and their complex relationship to what they learn, in the context of a real learning situation, namely schools. As a result of lack of sufficient practical experience, graduates from the present teacher education institutions are rarely able to meet the requirements of creating a child-friendly educational environment. Until our premier teacher institutes strive to set up schools that can become national models for elementary education, it makes sense to look at alternative models available in the country. It is in both these areas – child-friendly approaches and education of teachers – that we believe, well established independent schools could play a very significant role.

At this point, one would venture to state that all good independent schools cannot be fitted into the same rubric; it would be helpful to make a more fine-tuned classification of independent schools, so that constructive demands can be made on them according to their capacity to meet the pedagogic as well as egalitarian provisions of the RTE Act.

Among independent schools the range includes the following: (a) newly established international schools (that often function as ‘gated communities’); (b) older established ‘public schools’ (many of them residential); (c) small and large urban schools with several branches; (d) schools run by religious charitable trusts, again with many of them having several branches; (e) smaller private ‘English-medium’ schools that have mushroomed in every part of the country; and (f) alternative schools that are based on holistic educational philosophies and strive to create child-friendly environments.

Some of these independent schools have had long years of experience in working on the development of viable and successful models of elementary education that build on the idea of a learning continuum. Well-designed teaching-learning materials, with built-in strategies for assessment, are available. These may be suitably adapted for use on a larger scale. State governments could fruitfully draw upon the knowledge base of this educational work, and devise effective strategies for scaling up such programmes, building capacity and shifting attitudes in the government sector in different regions of the country. This would enhance the quality of the learning in government schools and make the

overall education system more receptive to the implementation of the RTE Act.

After a suitable ‘resource mapping’ of schools with such capabilities, the government could support them financially, help them develop basic training infrastructure, and encourage them to upgrade their senior teachers as teacher educators. Independent schools would then be in a position to offer ongoing refresher courses for teachers deputed by the government as well as other private institutions. Based on contact with actual students and classes, visiting teachers could be helped to gain a working understanding of educational principles along with contemporary methods of teaching.

Linking schools to colleges for education and government teacher education institutes, such as the Regional Institutes of Education, could also be mutually enriching. Such schemes have the potential of benefiting a significant number of schools and teachers in widening circles across each state. In fact, several independent schools and NGOs are already moving in the direction of setting up in-house teacher education facilities. Independent schools with a proven track record in providing sound education have thus a potential for playing a significant role in enabling shifts towards more child-friendly and teacher-friendly models in elementary schools across the country.

To summarize the points made earlier, the essential components of such a model would include:

- * A thoughtfully designed age-appropriate curriculum with a significant amount of local content and exemplars so that children, teachers and parents can relate to it.
- * A curriculum designed as a learning continuum that is mapped out in accordance with progressively organized learning goals in various subject areas. This would enable a blurring of sharp dividing lines between successive grades into which groups of students learning the same content at the same time must be fitted.
- * Preparation of teaching-learning materials for smaller, sequential curricular units, and participation of teachers in selecting and/or constructing appropriate teaching-learning materials. Teaching and learning could then be more flexible and the textbook be seen as a resource, rather than being treated as a ‘one-size-fits all’ storehouse of required knowledge centrally constructed by ‘experts’ for a whole state.
- * Assessment strategies that are built into the learning continuum as ‘assessment points’ and

‘milestones’, and which are both diagnostic and suggestive of remedial steps. This would do away with the need for the stressful ritual of exams.

* A shift in the teacher’s role as a facilitator of each student’s learning as the student navigates through the curricular route map at a pace commensurate with her abilities. This implies a shift in the relationship between teachers and students from the sole authority to that of cooperation and support.

The RTE Act is a set of injunctions meant to provide quality education to all citizens. Independent schools with a narrow upper class base will be coopted into making way for a more inclusive and diverse student body; ivory towers will be transformed into resource centres for neighbourhoods. It will not be easy for schools meant for English-speaking upper classes to accommodate first generation learners, who will need special help in all subjects, without segregating the two students groups in order to provide remedial coaching. Impoverished students from peasant backgrounds coming into an alien culture will naturally be anxious and vulnerable while some of those belonging on the other side could be cruel in their exclusions. Administrators and teachers will have to be vigilant, show goodwill, and generosity to overcome the class divide. They may have to design courses to develop emotional intelligence, to teach discernment and compassion. These worthy tasks could constitute significant steps toward a more cohesive and humane culture in schools.

Perhaps there are some institutions that would take an additional step towards inclusive ‘global citizenship’, find ways to create a resonance between academic subjects and emotional sympathies that draw on the common humanity of all students as ‘children of a fragile and endangered earth.’ The new approach would then not only serve to unite the student body, but would also address the urgent needs of the future. Dieter Helm, expert on energy policy at Oxford, predicts that ‘...living standards will have to be cut if our consumption is going to be environmentally sustainable. We are simply living beyond our – and the planet’s – means.’⁵ He argues that neither alternative technology nor carbon trading will solve the problem of global warming.

Addressing graduating students in the USA, Professor David Orr raises similar concerns about the earth in the context of current educational goals:

‘...education is no guarantee of decency, prudence, or wisdom. More of the same kind of education will only compound our problems. This is not an argument for ignorance, but rather a statement that the worth of education must now be measured against the standards of decency and human survival –

the issues now looming so large before us in the decade of the 1990s and beyond. It is not education that will save us, but education of a certain kind.’⁶

Unfortunately, there is an obverse side to the RTE Act. In the hands of a certain type of public servant, the nobler intentions of the act may well be lost. In the name of ‘quality’ educational practices could be homogenized to conform to state-sponsored textbooks, worthy schools could be penalized and ways could be found to sponsor undeserving students, those who have neither merit nor poverty to support their entry into private schools. Free admission to good schools will then become a prerogative of power.

These are two sides of the RTE coin. Only time will tell what side turns up.

* We acknowledge with gratitude Alok Mathur’s contributions to an earlier draft of this paper.

Footnotes:

1. *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society*. W.W. Norton & Co., New York, 1992, p. 17.
2. While laying down the curriculum and evaluation procedure, the academic authority notified under sub-Rule (1) shall (a) formulate the relevant and age appropriate syllabus and textbooks and other learning material’. *Model Rules under the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009*. (emphasis added)
3. In Andhra Pradesh, and the state is no exception, 0.8% of students in class five who are non-literate; 4.7% who recognize only letters; 23.8% recognize whole words; 23.8% who read at class one level; and 56.6% at class two levels; the number who read to their age level is negligible. (ASER, 2010)
4. <http://www.education.nic.in/cd50years/home.htm>
<http://www.education.nic.in/cd50years/home.htm>
5. ‘Sins of Emission’, *The Wall Street Journal*, 13 March 2008, op-ed page.
6. ‘What is Education For: Six Myths About the Foundations of Modern Education’, *From Context: A Quarterly for Humane Sustainable Development*, Winter 1991.

